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ABSTRACT

This report describes an external review of education reform in Oklahoma that focuses on standards, assessment, and accountability. Analysis of written documents and interviews with leaders from government, education, business, and other stakeholders indicate that the biggest strength of Oklahoma's education system is the widely shared, genuine commitment to improving opportunities for all young people. Results find that Oklahoma's standards and assessments and ACT's Standards for Transition have significant strengths, though there are also shortcomings. The assessment system provides measures of student progress against state standards, as well as measures permitting comparisons with students in other states; includes tests in a broad number of subjects; and uses the ACT to good advantage. However, the array of tests is disjointed. Strengths of the accountability system include: reports on performance are widely disseminated, high stakes appear to motivate students and schools to succeed, and higher education is a genuine partner in school accountability. Some of the many problematic areas include: it is unclear how useful test results are to schools and the public, interventions for low-performing schools must be strengthened, and the system has few stakes for anyone. Recommendations for improvement in each area are included. Three appendices present review team biographies, references, and interviews. (SM)

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Aiming Higher

Leveraging the Opportunities for Education Reform in OKLAHOMA

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Achieve, Inc.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help states and the private sector raise standards and performance in America's schools. Founded at the 1996 National Education Summit, Achieve has sponsored two additional Summits in 1999 and 2001.

Achieve helps states raise academic standards, measure performance against those standards, establish clear accountability for results and strengthen public confidence in our education system. To do this, we:

- ☐ help states **benchmark** their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- ☐ provide sustained **public leadership** and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- ☐ build **partnerships** that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- ☐ serve as a **national clearinghouse** on education standards and school reform.

AIMING HIGHER:

LEVERAGING THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN

OKLAHOMA

Part I of a Review of Standards, Assessments and Accountability

Prepared by Achieve, Inc., for

The Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition
The Oklahoma State Department of Education
The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education
And The Governor's Office

Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative
August 2002

About This Review

In summer 2001, in response to a request from the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition (OBEC), the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Oklahoma State Department of Education, and the Governor's Office, Achieve organized an external review of the state's efforts to establish a standards-based system of education. The review evolved to be a two-part study. The first was a policy-level analysis of the larger issues and decisions that govern the progress of reform in the state, specifically its success in establishing a system of standards, assessments and accountability. The second was a detailed study of the strengths and weaknesses of Oklahoma's current system of standards and assessments in English language arts and mathematics, including the related standards and assessments of the American College Testing program (ACT) with which Oklahoma has formed a close partnership.

To carry out this policy review, Achieve assembled a team with expertise in the areas that were of particular concern to Oklahoma reform leaders (brief biographies of the review team members are included in Appendix A). The review team analyzed a comprehensive set of written documents dealing with key aspects of Oklahoma's education system, with a special emphasis on standards, assessments and accountability (a list of these documents is provided in Appendix B). Achieve team members visited Oklahoma for two days in November 2001, interviewing a cross-section of leaders from government, business, education and other stakeholder groups, as well as senior staff from the Oklahoma State Department of Education (a list of those interviewed is contained in Appendix C). Achieve reviewers compared their reactions and impressions and commented on major findings. Although Achieve invited the executive committee of OBEC to review a draft for factual accuracy, the observations and conclusions are entirely our own.

We are keenly aware of the limits of this kind of review and of the risks inherent in offering up findings and recommendations based upon a limited exposure to a complex set of issues embedded in the state's unique history and traditions. We are equally aware that, despite the real progress we have made over the past decade in learning what works in education reform, there is much that we do not yet know. Nonetheless, in this report we have strived to provide state policymakers with our best judgment as to the current status of education reform in Oklahoma and areas for improvement over the next decade. We appreciate the invitation of Oklahoma leaders to open their system to review by Achieve and hope our report will prove helpful to those with policymaking responsibility for the education of Oklahoma's students.

Achieve has conducted similar reviews of other state systems, most recently at the request of education policymakers in Maryland and Texas. Those policy reviews can be read on Achieve's Web site, www.achieve.org.

ABOUT ACHIEVE, INC.

Achieve, Inc., is an independent, nonprofit, bipartisan organization created after the 1996 National Education Summit by the nation's governors and business leaders to help states raise academic standards and improve schools. Achieve provides advice and assistance to state policy leaders on issues of academic standards, assessments and accountability. It has a small staff, augmented by a team of senior advisers, and conducts much of its work in partnership with other education and business organizations. Under the auspices of Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative, 16 states have sought Achieve's external reviews of state education policy issues since 1998.

To carry out this review, Achieve drew upon several nationally respected experts: Ruben Carriedo, senior research associate at the University of Michigan School of Education; Paul Reville, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education and the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform; Janis Somerville, senior associate with the University System of Maryland and the National Association of System Heads for colleges and universities; and John Stevens, executive director of the Texas Business and Education Coalition. Matthew Gandal, Achieve's executive vice president, chaired the review team. Robert Rothman, formerly a senior project associate at Achieve, and Jean Slattery, director of Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative, also participated in the review. Slattery organized the review and co-authored this report with Rothman.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, PART I

In 2001, the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition (OBEC), the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Oklahoma State Department of Education, and the Governor's Office, asked Achieve, Inc., to undertake an independent review of the state's policies and practices to improve schools by setting high academic standards and holding schools and students accountable for results.

In examining the state's record of reform and talking with a wide cross-section of residents, it was clear to Achieve's team of experts that standards, assessments and accountability have been at the heart of Oklahoma's efforts to improve its schools for more than a decade. Landmark legislation in 1990 set the state on a course to create content standards and begin statewide testing five years later. Along the way, the state has sent a clear signal about its commitment to reform, enacting standards and tests and initiating a limited accountability system despite its fiscal constraints. Both higher education and the private sector have been significant contributors to the state's success.

This is important context as Oklahoma enters the next phase of standards-based reform. The state is preparing for a periodic review of its standards, which provides an ideal opportunity to strengthen them and the tests aligned to them at a time when accountability based on academic results should increase. As is the case with the other 49 states, Oklahoma will move forward in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act, the new federal education law whose provisions include expansion of state testing, attention to the achievement of all students and shared accountability for results.

While Achieve does not minimize the work that must be done or the challenges posed by doing it in a large rural state with a diverse population, we consider Oklahoma well positioned to make significant progress. As state government, K–12 and higher education, and the private sector work together to make progress in Oklahoma's next phase of reform, we urge policymakers and others interested in supporting school improvement to focus their efforts on a few key goals:

- ✓ **Strengthen the Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) so that standards provide a more challenging foundation for school improvement efforts by the state and local school districts.**

In addition to this review of its education reform policies, Oklahoma asked Achieve to conduct a comprehensive study of its standards and tests in English and mathematics and their relationship to ACT, which the state has used to good effect to communicate expectations for college preparedness and help more students meet them. *Measuring Up*, the resulting report that serves as a companion to this policy review, offers a road map to improving the state's standards and tests. Oklahoma's PASS has some strong features on which to build. They are comprehensive, measurable, generally compatible with the ACT's Standards for Transition and

tests, and, in some areas, quite rigorous. In particular, Oklahoma's math standards lay strong conceptual foundations for grades K–5 and, overall, contain a well-developed sequence of knowledge and skills.

However, Achieve noted significant areas for improvement, which Oklahoma should strive to address through the upcoming, legislatively mandated review of PASS. These include clarifying the level of rigor expected by the standards through use of suggested reading lists or sample text in English language arts and sample problems in math and restructuring the English language arts standards so that the development of skills from grade to grade is explicit and the most important content receives the most emphasis.

✓ **Leverage grade-by-grade testing provisions of the new federal education law to create a coherent testing system that promotes challenging expectations for all students.**

Oklahoma has made some good choices in constructing its assessment system, such as directly measuring students' ability to compose written prose and testing in subjects beyond reading and math.

While the state built a strong foundation with its assessment system, Achieve identified four major challenges with which policymakers need to contend. First, while each test offers results that may be useful in some settings, the mix of state standards-based, national norm-referenced and college admissions tests may be sending a mixed signal about the primacy of the content found in Oklahoma's standards. Second, the level of rigor fluctuates from test to test. Third, Oklahoma lacks English and math tests in grades 4, 6 and 7 required by the new federal law. Fourth, at the high school level, the state needs to add to its battery of tests to cover coursework students pursue after 10th grade. Oklahoma's goal should be a set of tests from elementary to high school that are tightly aligned with PASS and can provide consistent and comparable results to educators and parents. The State Department of Education is laying the groundwork for such a coherent testing program and plans to take the worthwhile step of engaging outside experts to ensure the tests are vertically aligned from one grade to the next, creating an appropriate progression of skills and knowledge students are expected to master.

✓ **Enhance the accountability system to sharpen its focus on the achievement of all students and to create incentives for improvement among more schools, teachers and students.**

Oklahoma has seen results improve when consequences are attached to performance; the higher test scores under the Reading Sufficiency Act and a 10-percentage point percent jump in the passing rate on the 8th-grade reading test after a passing score was required to obtain a driver's license have shown that accountability works. But beyond 8th graders and elementary school educators, there are no significant consequences for performance — good or bad — for others in the education system. The state only identifies the lowest-performing schools, and the expectations for acceptable performance are so low that few schools earn the rating for more

than a year at a time. As a result, the accountability system does not lead to effective targeting of assistance and resources to the schools most in need. In particular, minority students may be at risk because the state historically did not produce achievement data that drew attention to their lagging performance. We encourage Oklahomans to strengthen the state's commitment to helping all children achieve by bolstering the accountability system. A vital step would be the creation of a data system to track students' performance from grade to grade and place to place. Once it identifies schools as low performing, the state must ensure they get adequate and effective assistance. If schools fail to improve after receiving that assistance, more dramatic intervention should occur. The state should be better positioned to take these steps now that test results are reported in disaggregated form and an Academic Performance Index has been added to create incentives for all schools to improve.

✓ **Report achievement results clearly so that they are more useful to schools and to the public.**

Oklahoma has made a commitment to report fully on school and student performance. While the supply of information appears to be ample, its delivery may not be as effective as it could be. Achieve's review team heard differing opinions about the usefulness of performance reports to schools in planning for improvement. Public accountability could be enhanced by replacing the separate reports produced by the State Department of Education and the Governor's Office with a single, jointly published report, based on a common set of performance indicators and other data. It is needlessly confusing for the public to have to sift and sort related information from two different sources.

✓ **Tie achievement of the state's standards more closely to opportunities to succeed after high school, such as college admissions and employment.**

Oklahoma has taken important steps to tie its overall efforts to raise student achievement to its goal of increasing the number of students who attend college. The state has steadily increased the percentage of high school juniors and seniors taking the ACT and has seen its average scores rise at the same time. Not surprisingly given their different purposes and origins, the ACT and Oklahoma's standards and tests are compatible, but not completely consistent. To increase the likelihood of students succeeding on both state tests and the ACT, Oklahoma should judiciously add key elements of the ACT to its standards and tests. In addition, to safeguard their academic rigor, the state's career and technology (CareerTech) education programs should not be allowed to function apart from the accountability system for other schools and students. Responsibility for CareerTech programs serving high school students should lie with the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to ensure that they deliver solid academic preparation for the resources allotted and prepare their graduates to succeed in higher education and to meet current workplace demands.

✓ **Forge a statewide consensus in support of common, rigorous standards for all students.**

Oklahoma has maintained efforts to raise standards for more than a decade, initiating innovative programs such as the leveraging of the ACT exam to bring earlier attention to college preparation. The state faces a time of transition, in terms of both revising its standards and selecting its political leadership. Some in Oklahoma question whether the notion of raising all students to high standards is a universally accepted view. Balancing accountability with the autonomy of the state's more than 500 local school districts remains a critical concern for many.

In our view, traditions of local control are not at odds with the idea that all students should master a common body of knowledge and skills. Both state and local leaders bear the responsibility of ensuring that a high school diploma in Oklahoma actually signifies readiness to succeed in higher education or fulfilling careers. It will be critical for the business and postsecondary education communities to raise their voices in support of this idea and to continue to make the connection between well-educated citizenry and the state's economic and civic vitality.

EDUCATION REFORM: THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Last October, governors, corporate leaders, state education leaders and educators gathered to shape the next phase of school improvement at the 2001 National Education Summit. The Summit meeting marked only the fourth time in American history that education policymakers have met to discuss common challenges and define common solutions — and the first time teachers and principals attended. These Summits have played a pivotal role in defining a consensus view to guide states' school improvement efforts.

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush and the 50 governors set broad, bold goals for the nation's education system at every level from early childhood through adult training and development. In 1996, governors and business executives committed to establish clear, challenging expectations for what students should know and be able to do in elementary and secondary school; regular measurement of student and school performance; and public accountability for results. In 1999, governors, CEOs and education leaders focused on concrete actions needed to make these ideas a reality in classrooms: improving the quality of teaching, strengthening accountability and putting in place the supports needed to help all students achieve high standards.

Participants at the 2001 Summit advanced three sets of principles to help boost student performance across the board while closing the achievement gap: improving state assessment systems to direct resources and support where they are needed most; developing firm, fair and balanced accountability systems that will guarantee all students an equal opportunity to achieve high standards; and creating and sustaining a top-flight education workforce while injecting responsibility for results into the profession. Educators and executives from government and business reaffirmed their commitment to the twin goals of excellence and equity in America's schools:

> We must raise achievement for all students while closing the achievement gap separating the educational "haves" from the "have-nots." These goals are an irreducible educational minimum for the United States. Nothing less than their full attainment will serve the nation's social, democratic and economic interests.

Many states have come a long way since the 1996 Summit. Virtually all states have put in place standards and tests to assess educational progress in the core academic areas, and nearly half are developing incentives and consequences for schools, districts and students tied to results. Yet, as standards-based reform enters its second decade, new challenges loom. No state has eliminated the achievement gap once and for all. Test results are just beginning to count for students and schools in most states. And while many students are learning more and test scores are gradually improving, more dramatic improvements are needed for all students to succeed. Public confidence in schools is rising, yet, at the same time, a small but vocal minority of reform critics are urging policymakers to turn back to the pre-standards era. Most recently, the law governing federal involvement in schools — the Elementary and Secondary Education Act — will ask

states to do more and do better when it comes to assessment and accountability. States will be held accountable to national policymakers for ensuring that schools make progress toward meeting standards, and new testing systems will be needed to gauge their annual progress.

EDUCATION REFORM IN OKLAHOMA

READINESS FOR REFORM

In looking to improve and accelerate standards-based reform efforts, Oklahoma is building off an impressive foundation. The state embraced the standards agenda earlier than most, with comprehensive legislation adopted in 1990 that set in motion a series of policies that have guided state actions since. In the wake of the legislation, the state adopted content standards outlining what all students are expected to know and be able to do and has revised them continually. It developed and implemented tests to measure student attainment of the standards as early as 1995. And the state has put in place a number of measures to hold students and schools accountable for performance.

These efforts are particularly impressive given the circumstances under which state officials act. In contrast to many states with a long tradition of state-level education policy, Oklahoma is proud of local control. With more than 500 school districts, many of which are quite small, local districts represent strong power centers. In many cases, the school districts are the largest employers in their communities.

Oklahoma also has moved to improve its education system despite severe fiscal constraints. The Achieve review team heard over and over during its visit that Oklahoma is a poor state with a large rural population that does not have a lot of money to spend on education. The reviewers also heard repeatedly that Oklahoma teachers are among the lowest-paid in the nation. Education reform is not without cost, and the fact that the state has been able to implement some significant changes despite its limited resources suggests that the priorities of its leaders are right.

As the state moves forward, it can build on a number of substantial assets, in addition to its strong foundation in standards-based reform. One significant plus is the active and committed leadership of higher education. The strong involvement of colleges and universities in K–12 reform is a rare and welcome sign. Hans Brisch, the chancellor of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, and the regents have taken bold steps to improve the preparation of Oklahoma students for higher education by teaming up with the ACT program to make the ACT series of tests widely used throughout the state and by strengthening admissions standards. These initiatives affect most Oklahoma students, and they appear to be widely embraced.

Another significant asset is the strong interest and involvement of the business community. Business leaders from a variety of industries appear actively engaged and willing to work with elected leaders to improve education. The formation of the OBEC is a powerful sign that business leaders intend to remain engaged and are willing to invest resources in creating an institution to promote their involvement. At the same time, the success of the 2001 MAPS for Kids initiative in Oklahoma City, which called for extending a tax increase and issuing a bond for educational improvements, demonstrates that business leaders' involvement can pay off.

Getting 60 percent of voters to approve an increase in taxes is rarely easy, but the partnership of business leaders and elected officials from both major political parties made it happen.

Despite many positive signs, the Achieve review team also heard a number of questions that Oklahoma should answer as it moves forward in strengthening its standards, assessments and accountability systems. One question is whether the many actors involved in education reform speak with a unified voice. Achieve has found in other states that, while top leaders from various sectors may disagree on strategies, a common message about goals is essential. For one thing, it shows students, parents and schools that there is one set of expectations for performance. Sending mixed messages could be confusing and could complicate efforts to reach the common goals.

In addition, a unified voice can help ensure continued support for the reforms. This is particularly important at a time of political transition, as Oklahoma currently faces. The common refrain can reassure the public that the agenda will move forward no matter who controls the legislature or the governor's mansion. In Texas, for example, unified leadership from both political parties, business and education has helped ensure that that state's reform effort remained intact over a decade and over three governorships (including a change from Democratic control to Republican).

Another question the review team heard from Oklahomans was whether the entire education and political community shared a desire to raise standards and achievement. To be sure, the commitment from the Governor's Office, the State Department of Education, the Regents for Higher Education and businesses is tangible and strong. But the review team also heard some reluctance from rural areas and from their elected representatives. There was a sense of satisfaction with the current system and a concern that changes could damage what they had and produce a generation no longer willing to stay in those rural areas.

The review team also heard questions about the legislature's practice of authorizing reforms without providing the money to carry them out. Although funding is always an issue, did these practices indicate that the legislature is lukewarm about the reforms? Why has there been so little outcry about this practice from supporters of the reforms?

With these questions in mind, Achieve is pleased to offer its observations and recommendations about Oklahoma's standards, assessment and accountability systems. As they chart a course for the next phase in the state's decade-long reform effort, we hope state leaders will find Achieve's perspective on standards, assessment and accountability to be of value. In offering these findings, we must add that these reform elements by themselves do not produce better schools and better-educated students. They provide information and incentives to enable students, parents, teachers, principals and public officials to make the changes needed to improve learning; we do not want to minimize the importance of those changes. Schools need teachers who can teach all students to reach high standards and principals who can lead their staffs to do so. Districts also need the capacity to assist schools in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. Although issues of

capacity — specifically, teacher quality and the knowledge and skills of educators — are beyond the scope of this report, we must emphasize that no significant improvement will occur until the state addresses them, in addition to strengthening standards, assessments and accountability.

A Propitious Time

Oklahoma's examination of its standards, assessment and accountability policies comes at a propitious time. The state is about to embark on a periodic review of its standards. As standards are revised, assessments must be upgraded to ensure that they remain aligned to the standards. As tests are revised, it makes sense to take a hard look at the totality of the assessment system to ensure that all tests are serving useful purposes. It is important, as well, to examine the uses to which the assessments are put to ensure that they provide appropriate information and incentives for students, educators and the public.

Timing also is important because of the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which will require all states to re-examine their assessment and accountability systems and make significant changes. Specifically, the law requires states to put in place annual reading and mathematics tests, aligned with state standards, in grades 3 through 8. Test results must be broken down by race, gender, income and other factors. The law also requires states to set a specific trajectory to allow all students to reach proficiency within 12 years. Schools that fail to demonstrate adequate progress toward that goal will be subject to a variety of sanctions.

The statute has enormous implications for virtually all states, including Oklahoma. Currently only nine states meet the law's requirements for annual tests in grades 3 through 8, and few have in place all the components of accountability the law requires. Complying with the law represents an opportunity to remake assessment and accountability systems so that they work more effectively. The challenge will be to do so in the right way and avoid easy steps that meet the letter of the law but fail to capture its spirit. The Achieve review clearly shows that many Oklahomans had been heading in the direction the No Child Left Behind Act points, even before the law's outlines became clear. The statute thus provides rules that can guide the state as it pursues the reform course it already is on.

MAJOR FINDINGS: STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT BENCHMARKING

As noted earlier, in addition to requesting a review of its education reform policies, Oklahoma also requested that Achieve undertake a comprehensive study of its standards and assessments in English language arts and mathematics — including examining the degree of fit between ACT's Standards for Transition, ACT 11/12, tests and Oklahoma's standards and assessments. While the results of this standards benchmarking and alignment study are explained in detail in Part II of Achieve's report to Oklahoma, called *Measuring Up*, a summary of key findings follows.

Oklahoma's standards and assessments and ACT's Standards for Transition have significant strengths:

- Oklahoma's standards in English language arts and mathematics are comprehensive, written in clear, jargon-free prose and typically expressed in measurable terms.
- Oklahoma's standards are generally compatible with ACT's Standards for Transition, which focus on essential content and skills necessary for college admission.
- Oklahoma's Core Curriculum Tests generally align well with those standards identified as appropriate for testing at the state level.
- Oklahoma's standards in mathematics lay a strong conceptual foundation in grades K–5 and, overall, contain a thoughtful, well-developed sequence of knowledge and skills.
- Oklahoma has made the right decision by administering assessments that measure students' ability to compose written prose.

Despite these strengths, there are concerns about shortcomings in the standards and assessments that Oklahoma should address:

- Oklahoma's standards sometimes lack specificity, and this lack of precision clouds the level of rigor expected. Clarifying the level of rigor is critical and could be accomplished by using suggested reading lists in English language arts and including sample tasks in mathematics, for example.
- Oklahoma's standards in English language arts lack a clear and consistent progression of knowledge and skills from grade level to grade level. Making the progression explicit and ensuring the most important content receives the most emphasis would have multiple benefits — it would present a more coherent picture of the subject matter, add greater precision to the level of rigor the state expects, and sharpen the focus and organizational structure of the standards.

- Oklahoma's standards do not clearly articulate how students' writing skills are expected to develop over time and should be revised to specify the qualities the state expects students to demonstrate at each grade level.

- Mathematics standards, while generally comprehensive, treat certain topics inadequately, particularly in algebra and in probability, statistics and data analysis. In revising its standards, Oklahoma should consider fortifying these topics, as today's workplace demands a level of analytical and statistical skill not required in earlier generations.

- The level of rigor on the Core Curriculum Tests fluctuates. In English language arts, it is appropriate for grade 5, too low for grade 8, and nearly at the appropriate level on the English II test. In math, tests in grades 5 and 8 sometimes measure standards from earlier grades and emphasize recall and procedural knowledge at the expense of more intellectually demanding skills. The level of rigor of the Algebra I test is more on target. As the state fully develops its grades 3–8 system of tests aligned to the standards and vertically aligned to each other, it should even out the level of rigor so a tight fit results between what the standards call for and what the Core Curriculum Tests measure.

- Although ACT standards and Oklahoma's standards are generally compatible, ACT tests in English, reading and math are not strongly aligned to Oklahoma's standards. The gap can be narrowed by judiciously augmenting the state's system of standards and tests with key content from the ACT.

MAJOR FINDINGS: ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Oklahoma's assessment system includes a mix of tests at various grade levels: a norm-referenced test in reading and mathematics at grade 3; criterion-referenced tests in several subjects at grades 5 and 8; and an end-of-instruction test of high school English, with an algebra test coming soon. In addition, nearly all districts administer ACT's EXPLORE and PLAN in grades 8 and 10 and a substantial proportion of students takes the ACT in grades 11 and 12. This array of assessments has certain strengths.

Strengths of the Assessment System

✓ **It provides measures of student progress against the state standards, as well as measures that permit comparisons with students in other states.**

Oklahomans deserve to know if students are meeting the standards the state has set; Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests and end-of-instruction tests are designed to provide that information. Such tests also encourage teachers to focus on the standards and to design instructional programs that will enable students to reach them.

At the same time, the state also administers a norm-referenced test — currently the Stanford Achievement Test, 9th edition (SAT-9), which shows how students perform relative to other students nationally. These tests provide some perspective on student performance, much as growth charts show whether children are gaining weight and growing in height at the same rate as other children typically do. The state also participates in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which provides comparative information about state-level performance.

Many states opt for one type of test or the other. In those cases, some information is missing. While comparisons also help students, parents and educators understand student performance, in Achieve's view, the measure of performance against standards is critical.

✓ **It includes tests in a broad number of subjects.**

Oklahoma's decision to test students in history, government, geography, science and the arts commendably places these subjects on a par with reading and math and ensures that they are not neglected in the curriculum. This wide array of state tests makes Oklahoma rare among the states. Although nearly all states test students in reading and math, 29 states use science tests aligned with standards, and 22 states use aligned history/social studies tests. Only six states test students in the arts.

Achieve's concern, however, is that loading all of the tests into two grade levels places a tremendous burden on 5th- and 8th-grade teachers. Although tests at different grade levels can

measure accumulated achievement, these teachers face the lion's share of the responsibility and the time commitment for preparing students for tests in a broad range of subjects.

✓ **The system uses the ACT to good advantage.**

Unlike other states, where college admissions tests assume great importance in students' lives but are separate from schools' efforts to raise achievement, Oklahoma has deliberately set out to make the ACT an integral part of its effort to improve the academic preparation of middle and high school students. Through the initiative of Chancellor Hans Brisch and the State Regents for Higher Education, the state has steadily increased the proportion of 11th and 12th graders who take the ACT and has raised average scores at the same time. Some 71 percent of the class of 2000 took the exam, compared with 64 percent of the class of 1994. Oklahoma's average ACT score rose faster than the national average during the 1990s. This is commendable; typically, as more students take such a test, the average score decreases to reflect the participation of students who previously may not have intended to go to college or prepared themselves for college.

In addition, the state has helped students prepare for the ACT and for their lives after high school by implementing preparatory programs in earlier grades. Under those programs, virtually all schools in the state administer the EXPLORE exam in 8th grade and the PLAN exam in 10th grade. Both tests are linked to the ACT and provide students and teachers with information about students' strengths and weaknesses in advance of the admissions test. Results are encouraging; the percentage of Oklahoma's first-time college students enrolled in remedial courses has declined, and minority students have made significant gains on the ACT.

Areas for Improvement

Both Oklahoma and ACT assessments have many worthwhile features. But despite these strengths, the assessment system raises a number of questions and poses some concerns.

✓ **The array of tests is disjointed and may send mixed signals to students and schools.**

As a test designed to be used in many states, the 3rd-grade norm-referenced test was not designed to measure Oklahoma PASS standards. As a result, teachers may choose to focus more on the material on the test than on the standards, thus creating mixed messages about what is most important to learn. Similarly, high school teachers face the predicament of preparing students to take the ACT and are thus obliged to consider reinforcing skills not specified in PASS.

The array of tests may also cause confusion because they report different types of results in different ways. The results of norm-referenced tests show percentile rankings, or the performance of Oklahoma students compared with a national sample. For example, in 1999, Oklahoma 3rd graders performed in the 66th percentile, meaning that they performed better than 66 percent of the nation. The results of the criterion-referenced tests, however, tell another story. They show the proportion of students who perform at the unsatisfactory, limited knowledge,

satisfactory and advanced levels. In 2000, for example, 61 percent of Oklahoma 5th graders performed at the satisfactory level, and 15 percent performed at the advanced level in reading.

Without a way to relate satisfactory performance on the Core Curriculum Tests to percentile rankings — which may not be possible because the tests measure different things — it is not possible to compare the two sets of results. As a consequence, parents, educators and the public learn one thing about 3rd-grade performance and another thing about 5th-grade performance, and there is no way to tell whether one is better than another. Moreover, the two sets of results may conflict. For example, norm-referenced tests showed that performance in reading improved between 1998 and 1999, while Core Curriculum Test results showed performance stable over that time. What message do parents and the public receive about the state of student performance in Oklahoma?

The disjointed nature of the assessments is particularly acute at the high school level. There, all students take the end-of-instruction tests, and about two-thirds of students take the ACT. Yet, as the Achieve analysis shows, a substantial portion of the content of state standards is not assessed by ACT English and mathematics tests. Preparing students for both sets of tests poses a challenge for teachers.

In addition, the high school test sequence does not correspond to the course requirements in mathematics. For example, although students must take at least three years of mathematics (and perhaps four, if the legislature adopts Superintendent Sandy Garrett's proposal to require four years of mathematics to graduate), they are tested only in algebra, which for many students is the first or second course in the sequence. Without an examination to measure attainment of a certain body of content, how can the state ensure that students continue to take academic coursework? The lack of additional tests in mathematics is mitigated in part by the fact that over 95 percent of the state's 8th and 10th graders are tested with PLAN and over 70 percent are tested with the ACT. However, having state end-of-course tests would fortify Oklahoma's efforts to upgrade mathematics education.

There is an issue for students enrolled in Oklahoma's CareerTech programs. The Achieve review team noted that these programs receive a substantial share of state education funds and that they have strong support from rural communities and their representatives in the legislature. The team believes that such students should not be exempted from the same standards all students are expected to demonstrate. By allowing CareerTech students to take courses that may not match the academic rigor of the courses taken by other students, or by creating a separate CareerTech system that would pull such students out of the academic requirements altogether, the state would be creating a two-tiered system of education — precisely the outcome a common set of standards for all students is intended to eliminate.

To their great credit, Superintendent Garrett and the state department leadership have been resolute in not allowing watered-down CareerTech courses to supplant the academic

requirements. The department needs to continue to be vigilant to ensure that this practice continues.

Recommendations for Building a Stronger Assessment System

As Oklahoma moves forward to improve its system of assessments, Achieve recommends that the state commit to the following goals:

✓ **Develop a coherent set of tests in grades 3–8.**

While the current system provides a great deal of information on student and school performance, testing in grades 3–8 will fill in the gaps in the current system that make it difficult to track student progress over time. As Texas has found, the ability to monitor performance from year to year has been extremely valuable to teachers and parents; it is a major reason the new federal law requires annual testing by every state.

Testing in every grade also could reduce some of the uneven weight on teachers in the few currently tested grades by allowing the state to spread some subjects out over two or three years. For example, the state might consider moving its grade 5 science test to grade 6, while maintaining, and perhaps combining, history, government and geography in grades 4 and 7. Testing science at grade 8 will keep the state in alignment with the NAEP testing schedule.

In developing the additional tests, Oklahoma will want to make sure that the overall system provides coherent information from year to year. The norm-referenced test in grade 3 might provide some important information, but it does not indicate whether students are meeting standards for that grade, and it is virtually impossible to track progress from performance on a norm-referenced test to performance on a criterion-referenced test in grade 4. The goal is to have a set of tests that supply coherent information regarding student performance against state standards over time. It thus makes sense for Oklahoma to have a set of grades 3–8 tests deliberately designed to measure performance against the state's standards so essential information can be tracked from year to year. Maintaining a norm-referenced test not designed to match state standards as the sole measure of performance should not be a part of the assessment system.

This does not mean that Oklahoma necessarily needs to develop the equivalent of its current grades 5 and 8 tests for grades 3, 4, 6 and 7. There are several ways the state can accomplish the goal of providing coherence without producing whole new tests. One way is to develop a hybrid test that combines a lower-cost commercially available test with items designed to measure state standards. California has taken this approach. There, the state initially administered a norm-referenced test, SAT-9 — the same test Oklahoma currently uses in grade 3. But the state immediately worked with the test's publisher to augment SAT-9 with additional test items created to measure standards not tapped by SAT-9. Over time, the proportion of SAT-9 items on

California tests has declined, while the proportion of standards-referenced items has increased, moving California to a wholly standards-based test.

Similarly, Delaware's testing program embeds an abbreviated version of SAT-9 within a state test that was designed to measure performance against the state's standards. This arrangement offers a number of advantages. It provides parents and schools with information on progress against the standards and comparisons with the nation as a whole; it also allows the state to equate results from year to year.

Significantly, the Oklahoma Education Association proposed developing a hybrid test during the 2001 legislative session. The association called the proposed test an "enhanced" norm-referenced test. Using hybrid tests in every grade would cost less than developing completely new tests for every grade, while at the same time providing coherent information from grade to grade.

Another option would be to leave the current tests in place while adding shorter versions of the tests in intervening grades. These shorter versions might consist of fewer questions and would take less time to administer, but they would provide a snapshot of student performance in reading and mathematics that would enable parents and educators to gauge student progress over time. The detailed information about performance that the 5th- and 8th-grade tests provide allows schools to receive enough information to adjust their instructional programs.

Oklahoma also could collaborate with other states in developing common tests based on similar standards. An example of such a collaboration is Achieve's Mathematics Achievement Partnership (MAP) — an effort involving 14 states meant to redefine mathematics education in the middle grades by using international benchmarks to build professional development, teaching tools and a common 8th-grade test.

✓ **Develop high school tests that measure what students are expected to learn.**

Oklahoma has strengthened requirements for high school course-taking and has developed end-of-instruction tests in English II, Writing (English II), Algebra I, Biology I and U.S. History designed to measure what the state expects students to learn in these key subjects. But there is a mismatch between the course requirements and the test requirements. The tests measure only coursework that could be completed by the end of grade 10.

Parents and the public have no assurance that students actually are learning upper-level material — even if students enroll in upper-level courses. The danger is that schools could label a course "Algebra II," but substantially dilute the content. Reviewers were told this was a real possibility in that currently no strict guidelines for making entries on the student transcript are in place.

The only way to ensure that students are learning what they are expected to learn is to establish a common core that reflects what all students are expected to know and be able to do by the time they graduate and develop tests to match.

One way to do this would be to augment the system of end-of-course tests to include measures of the higher-level coursework students are expected to master. Maryland, for example, has developed math tests in algebra and data analysis that students, starting with the class of 2007, will be required to pass to graduate; the state also is developing a test in geometry.

Another approach, which a number of states are employing, is to create a single high school exam that includes content from the common core. If Oklahoma chooses to go this route, the state should build on its existing system. Right now, the ACT has widespread credibility throughout Oklahoma, and over 70 percent of the state's graduates take the exam. A new set of high school exams could build on the ACT much in the way new tests in grades 3–8 can build on existing commercially available tests. By examining the content of the ACT and developing items that fill in the gaps between the ACT and state standards — for example, by adding an assessment of students' written prose, as the state is already planning to do — Oklahoma can put in place a test for all students that provides information considered credible without the expense and duplicative effort of developing a parallel set of tests. Colorado and Illinois are currently pursuing variations on this approach by requiring all students to take the ACT as part of their assessment batteries.

MAJOR FINDINGS: ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

In addition to implementing an extensive testing system, Oklahoma also has tried to make the test results count in a variety of ways by holding schools and students accountable for results. Oklahoma has attached consequences to performance to create incentives for improvement. It publicly reports results. It labels schools as "low performing" or "high challenge." It links the awarding of driver's licenses to test results.

Strengths of the Accountability System

✓ **Reports on performance are widely disseminated.**

As intended by the legislature, the Office of Accountability provides independent reports on the condition of education in Oklahoma. Its reports are distributed to every school, and principals are required to distribute them to parents as well. The news media regularly use the reports to provide information about schools and school system performance. As noted earlier, the State Department of Education also produces annual reports on performance. These are distributed throughout the state as well.

✓ **High stakes appear to motivate students and schools to succeed.**

In the few instances in which Oklahoma has tied significant consequences to performance, these actions appear to produce effects. The most visible is the requirement that students pass the 8th-grade reading test to earn a driver's license. This requirement is well known throughout the state, and the fact that students take it seriously undoubtedly contributes to their high performance. The proportion of 8th graders scoring satisfactory or above on the reading test climbed from 70 percent in 1996 to 81 percent in 1999.

Similarly, the goal that 90 percent of 3rd graders will be at grade level in reading has prompted significant changes. Under the Reading Sufficiency Act, school districts are at least partially reimbursed by the state for providing specialized tutoring for primary students in need of reading remediation. Third graders also may be recommended for retention, with the parent or guardian being involved in the decisionmaking process. Setting the goal also has sparked a tremendous demand for professional development.

✓ **Higher education is a genuine partner in school accountability.**

Unlike other states, where colleges and universities have tended to blame the schools for failing to produce qualified applicants, higher education in Oklahoma has worked directly with the schools to improve preparation and to make sure that the preparation pays off in admission and placement. Such efforts help build support for graduation requirements and tests by showing students and parents that performance opens doors.

In Oklahoma, the regents have used the tools at their disposal to make performance pay off. They have raised the coursework requirements for admission, encouraged widespread use of the ACT and set standards on the exam for placement. By taking full advantage of the Educational Planning and Assessment System, the regents are able to track student performance longitudinally. In addition, the legislature also has authorized a scholarship program based on coursework and ACT scores.

Areas for Improvement

Despite these strengths, the accountability system raises a number of questions and poses some concerns.

✓ **It is unclear how useful test results are to schools and the public.**

To their credit, the state and its testing contractors produce a number of reports to make test results public. The test contractor produces reports to parents on individual children's test scores. The State Department of Education produces an annual volume, *Investing in Oklahoma*, which reports statewide performance on a range of indicators, including state tests, the ACT and NAEP. The department also produces annual report cards for each school and district that provide information on test results and other performance indicators. The Office of Accountability also provides different school, district and state report cards that show test scores, other performance measures and contextual data, such as student demographics. The reports also compare school performance with that of the district and state.

While there is an ample supply of information, it is not clear it is delivered in the most effective manner. Oklahoma citizens are in danger of being information rich and insight poor. For one thing, the reports from the State Department of Education and the Office of Accountability are potentially confusing. They use different data — the Office of Accountability reports lag behind the department's by a year because they are based on data from the department — and the agencies often put a different "spin" on the results. For example, the Office of Accountability reports only the percentage of students who perform at the satisfactory level and above, while the department has shifted to describing four levels of test performance — unsatisfactory, limited knowledge, satisfactory and advanced. It seems it would make sense to have a single report that draws from the strengths of each, or at the very least two reports that dovetail, working in conjunction with one another to send a single, focused message.

Our review team also heard differing opinions about reports to schools. Some schools seemed to find the reports helpful for planning improvements, while others did not. At least one district, in fact, developed its own tests to provide the diagnostic information officials felt the state tests lacked. The district tests, administered in grades 3, 4, 5, 8, and Algebra 1 and Biology, are developed by teachers to align to state standards. They report student performance on each of the state's objectives tested and provide results more quickly than state tests do.

✓ **The state has not done enough to ensure that all students, particularly traditionally low-performing minority groups, are achieving high standards and are being assessed.**

Like many states, Oklahoma has a substantial minority population. Students from minority groups tend to lag behind white students in performance. Representatives from several minority groups expressed grave concerns about the lack of attention to these achievement gaps. A particular concern was that, despite a federal requirement to break down test results to show performance by racial and ethnic groups, the state did not publish disaggregated results to be included in school and district reports until 2001. This was one factor the U.S. Department of Education cited in granting Oklahoma a waiver from the 2001 deadline for implementing a final assessment system under the 1994 federal education law that became No Child Left Behind.

Some Latino parents said it was easy for English language learners to be exempt from state tests. Although state policy appears to require such students to take tests after a year in the United States, parents said students have been exempt for several years. With no information on their performance, their needs are unlikely to be addressed.

Similarly, representatives of Native American organizations expressed serious concerns about the lack of attention to the performance of Native American students as well. Fortunately, this situation appears to be changing — and providing disaggregated data is the first step in improving the performance of minority populations.

✓ **Current methods of rating school performance are not well understood and do not lend themselves to targeting resources effectively or to promoting continuous improvement.**

Like a number of states, Oklahoma rates schools by determining the proportion of students who reach the satisfactory level on state tests. Schools are designated as "low performing" if more than 30 percent of students score below the satisfactory level in both reading and math; they are designated as "high challenge" if they receive a low-performing rating for three consecutive years.

This method appears to focus in on schools in the most need, but our reviewers heard a number of concerns about the approach. One concern is that the methodology used to set performance levels is not well understood and participation in the process is limited to educators. This has raised questions about the validity of the school ratings for some observers.

In addition, the expectations seem to be quite low and easily achieved. Because the "low-performing" rating requires low scores in two subjects, a school can shed the designation by raising performance slightly in one subject one year (or simply benefit from a higher-performing 5th- or 8th-grade class). Few schools stay on the list long enough to earn the high-challenge designation. In fact, the list appears to be something of a revolving door; schools are designated as low performing one year, get off the list the next, then slip back and get on the list the following year.

This type of system does not allow the state to do what rating systems should allow it to do: namely, target resources to the schools that need them the most and encourage all schools to improve performance continually.

In contrast, a number of states have set improvement goals for each school. Some use multiple levels of school performance analogous to the multiple levels of student performance Oklahoma uses. The approach provides goals for all schools, even those meeting standards, to strive toward. For example, if a school were rated "satisfactory," indicating that it had met standards, it could still have a goal of reaching the "advanced" level.

Other states set specific targets for improvement for each school. California requires each school to demonstrate a certain level of growth in achievement each year. The state provides financial rewards to schools that exceed their targets and provides resources and the possibility of intervention for schools that fail to meet them. The state also requires each racial and ethnic group of students within a school to meet growth targets.

Oklahoma, to its credit, is shifting to a system like California's, using an Academic Performance Index (API). Under the new system, each school and district would receive a rating based on state test results; school completion (attendance and graduation rates); and academic excellence (ACT scores, Advanced Placement course offerings and college remediation rates). Test results would be computed using an index that assigns weights to each level of performance on the state test, giving schools and districts higher scores for moving students to higher levels of performance. The overall result would be a score, with 1500 as the highest and 1000 as the state average. Each school and district would have to raise its API score each year by 5 percent of the difference between its API score and 1500.

This system has the commendable asset of including a number of factors in school rating, rather than relying solely on test scores (although test scores, appropriately, are required to constitute the majority of the API). This is in keeping with the new federal law that permits the use of indicators other than test results in rating school performance, providing the use of these indicators does not reduce the number of schools that would be identified on the basis of test results alone.

To ensure that the system serves the purpose of helping to guide school improvement, though, the state should publish not only the index, but also the data making up components of the index so that schools know where to target resources to meet their goals.

✓ **Interventions for low-performing schools need to be strengthened.**

While school ratings can by themselves be powerful means of encouraging schools to improve performance, accountability systems typically include methods of intervention in schools designated as low performing. Generally, such systems provide assistance, in the form of additional resources or technical assistance, to help schools turn themselves around. If such assistance does not result in improvement, states also have the authority to intervene in more drastic ways by replacing the staff, allowing children to transfer to another school or, in some cases, closing the school altogether.

Oklahoma provides some resources and assistance to low-performing schools, and more for high-challenge schools. But it is not at all clear such efforts are effective. As noted previously, schools frequently fall in and out of low-performing status, so whatever assistance manages to help them in one year appears to provide short-term benefit at best. The state has a well-regarded system of professional development institutes, which could provide needed assistance to low-performing schools, yet there is no link between the accountability ratings and the institutes.

In addition, sanctions at the state's disposal have not been used in powerful ways. To be sure, the state has intervened in one school, but that action is seen as an isolated incident. Schools around the state do not consider the possibility much of a threat. Oklahoma is far from alone in this regard. Nationwide, although 20 states have authority to impose sanctions on persistently poor-performing schools, only a handful of states have actually used such authority, and only in a smattering of schools. Yet when they have, the actions made a difference. In Maryland, for example, the state's decision in 2000 to turn over the management of four low-performing schools to a private firm sent a strong signal throughout the state that poor performance would not be tolerated.

✓ **The system has few stakes for anyone.**

Except for 8th graders and elementary school teachers and principals, there are no significant consequences for performance — good or bad — for anyone in the system. Students must take certain courses to graduate, but they can get by without learning any more than necessary to pass. Teachers and administrators can see their schools rated as low performing or high challenge, but not much happens to them if that is the case. Although the state has intervened in a few instances, the possibility of state action does not appear to be much of a motivation to educators. As a result, there is little incentive for improvement.

Not surprisingly, then, performance does not appear to drive behavior the way it does in other states where the consequences are more significant. In Massachusetts, for example, a requirement that students pass state tests to graduate from high school has sparked massive efforts to redesign teaching and learning and substantial remedial help for students at risk of failure. These efforts have dramatically paid off. In 2001, the first year the tests counted as a graduation requirement, 82 percent of 10th graders passed the English language arts test, up from

72 percent on the test's first administration in 1998; 75 percent passed the mathematics test, up from 48 percent three years earlier.

Likewise, in Texas, where schools are accountable for student performance, teachers and administrators across the state remain focused like a laser beam on their students' performance. Their work is driven by the need to raise performance. As a result, statewide results have risen steadily over time. The percentage of students passing the reading test rose from 74 percent in 1994 to 89 percent in 2001, and the proportion passing the mathematics test rose from 58 percent to 90 percent over that period.

✓ **Oklahoma's system of career and technology education is not well aligned with secondary and postsecondary expectations, nor is it routinely subjected to academic and fiscal accountability.**

Reviewers heard repeated concerns from political and business leaders and educators that while Oklahoma had once been a model for the nation in terms of career education, it was no longer staying apace. One concern is the lack of a smooth fit between career education and the rest of the educational system, specifically the comprehensive high school program and college-entrance requirements. Leaders from various sectors expressed unease that, while the State Department of Education and the State Regents for Higher Education have been strengthening the academic preparation of high school students, students in the CareerTech sector appear headed on a different path that may not be as rigorous as the academic requirements for those in the general education system. As a result, CareerTech students may be facing limited opportunities should they choose to pursue postsecondary education.

A second concern is the sense that many of the CareerTech programs are not preparing students for the current and future job market. While the programs may have been designed at a time when the industrial economy was dominant, the programs may be less relevant now in the information age.

A third concern is the high cost of the CareerTech centers in a state strapped for financial resources. In part because of the way the CareerTech system is funded, the centers appear to consume a disproportionate share of the state education budget. This is particularly worrisome since the centers have not yet produced evidence of their effectiveness.

✓ **Educators, parents and citizens are unable to track student performance over time.**

If students leave a school for another school in the same district or in another district, educators have no way of following the student to track his or her progress. Several states, such as Ohio, have developed extensive tracking systems that enable schools to monitor the progress of students over time without compromising privacy. Ohio's system includes a wealth of data on student achievement, including test scores, grades and course-taking, as well as information on

the costs of instructional services. In that way, the system allows educators to track the management of districts and schools, as well as student progress.

Texas has operated a similar system since 1995. The system also provides reports that show how students of various races and ethnicities and economic statuses perform. Oregon is making significant progress in implementing a secure student ID project to permit the State Department of Education to keep track of individual students' test scores, evaluate programs like Title I and migrant services, and facilitate online testing of students.

Recommendations for Building a Firm and Fair Accountability System

As Oklahoma moves forward to improve its assessment and accountability systems, Achieve recommends that the state:

✓ **Report results more clearly and make them more useful to schools and the public.**

Score reports are meant to serve several critical functions. Not only should they provide essential information for students, parents, teachers and schools, but the way in which the data are reported should make it straightforward for educators to pinpoint weaknesses in the instructional program to address them head on. Moreover, the linkages between school-level score reports and a state's accountability system, including its API, should be spelled out. Oklahoma is not alone in struggling to construct reports that encourage stakeholders to take constructive action. In fact some states are beginning to call for enhancement of their current score reports in their latest requests for test publisher proposals.

Large urban districts are equally concerned with this issue. The New York City Board of Education recently contracted with The Grow Network, a private firm based in New York, to produce a series of user-friendly, aligned reports for parents, teachers and principals that summarize achievement in English language arts and mathematics. The reports provide clear information on the extent to which students, classrooms and schools are meeting standards. More significantly, the reports also offer suggestions for how parents, teachers and principals can use the test data. For example, the parent report lists resources available in the local public library. The teacher report provides explanations of pertinent topics and offers effective teaching strategies, and the principal report allows administrators to look at student proficiency across classrooms and grades.

✓ **Break down test results by race and ethnicity for every school.**

Until late 2001, Oklahoma's reports on school and district performance showed how schools and systems performed overall without indicating how groups of students within each school and school system performed. In contrast, state reports provided information on different groups of students and showed significant gaps in performance between whites and ethnic minorities.

Breaking down results by race and ethnicity for individual schools can be extremely powerful. Schools that thought that they were doing well because their overall results were good found that they had rested on the performance of their majority students, while they did not effectively serve their minority students. This information led to significant changes in practice across the state. The new federal law will require every state to report annually such results for every school and school district.

In providing the results by race and ethnicity, Oklahoma needs to take care to provide results for groups that are large enough to be statistically valid (providing information by gender, special-education status and English proficiency also is important and will be required by the new federal law). Where such information exists, it should be public. Only then will members of minority groups feel that they "count" in Oklahoma.

✓ **Broaden the representation of participants in the standard-setting procedures for the state assessments.**

One of the critical elements in establishing performance standards or achievement levels is defining the representation of key advocates on the panels that identify the levels of achievement students should meet. Some states, such as Massachusetts, have attempted to set rigorous standards for their students with the participation of community representatives as well as experienced educators and have thus encouraged a more public participation and awareness of the state's expectations. In addition to widening the participation in standard-setting, states are best served by having an independent technical advisory committee review the proposed performance standards prior to their formal adoption by the state.

✓ **Sharpen the method of rating school performance.**

School ratings can serve three purposes. They identify the schools most in need of improvement. They provide information on school quality that is essential for accountability. They create incentives for *all* schools to raise performance levels. Oklahoma's current system accomplishes the first of these, although not as well as it could. The shift to the API could help accomplish the other two purposes as well.

However, by focusing only on performance gains, the new system fails to measure two other characteristics of school performance that are worth knowing: the school's current level of performance and its success in reducing achievement gaps. Of course, a school that has improved substantially deserves recognition, and the growth targets enable all schools, even those that have the farthest to go to attain proficiency, to earn recognition. Yet since the goal is proficiency, schools that have reached or approached that goal also deserve recognition. So do schools that have narrowed achievement gaps.

Delaware is putting a system in place that rates schools on all three factors: the overall level of performance, growth over time and success in raising the performance of low-achieving students. Each school is compared to a statewide target.

✓ **Provide direct assistance to low-performing schools and students.**

The Oklahoma State Department of Education has assigned teams to assist schools designated as low performing and high challenge, and some of these schools have received additional resources largely through federal programs designed to support school improvement. For example, 48 schools in 2000–01 received about $50,000 each under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, which provides funds for schools to adopt a schoolwide, research-based design for improvement.

Most of the assistance, though, went toward helping schools develop improvement plans. It is unclear whether the state provides any assistance in enabling the schools to carry out their plans or in making sure that they do — and that achievement rises as a result of the school's actions. As several people told the Achieve review team, many schools raise performance enough in one subject to make their way off the low-performing school list, only to decline the next year and get back on the list.

Other states offer models for providing intensive assistance that appear effective in helping schools raise their level of performance. Some of the most effective strategies involve state-trained educators who provide intensive aid to troubled schools. For example, North Carolina sends trained "assistance teams" of experienced educators to help low-performing schools. These teams help schools write and implement improvement plans and recommend changes needed to bring about improvements. They also evaluate the principal and staff and can recommend replacing teachers or administrators. The program seems to be working: Of the 15 schools assigned assistance teams in the first year, 14 reached their target for improved performance. Thirteen schools improved enough to earn cash bonuses from the state.

Some states employ regional centers to assist low-performing schools. In Florida, for example, the state's regional school improvement teams work intensively with schools receiving a grade of "F" on the state's rating system. The teams link schools with grant opportunities and other resources.

Even as the state gears up to amplify interventions in failing schools, it must also consider interventions for failing students. It already has an excellent example in its early reading initiative, which was the right place to start and is likely to go a long way in helping to prevent student failure. However, in looking beyond this effort, reviewers did not see the kind of academic scaffolding in place that will be necessary if all students are to achieve proficiency in a rigorous, standards-based system. In Massachusetts, by contrast, the state invested substantial resources to implement extra programs for students in danger of failing the graduation exams.

These programs, moreover, did not just give students more of the same; they tried new strategies to help students learn what they may not have mastered in the regular classroom.

✓ **Apply real sanctions after continued failure.**

Intervention and assistance can help turn schools around. But what if schools do not improve? States must take more serious action. As governors, business leaders and educators at the 1999 National Education Summit pledged in their Action Statement: "We will be prepared to restructure or reconstitute schools or provide parents and students with other options. The state has a solemn obligation to ensure that no child is trapped in a failing school."

Many states, like Oklahoma, have laws on the books to provide some sanction for schools that fail continually. But like most states, Oklahoma has used this authority sparingly — perhaps too sparingly. It also may be the case that imposed sanctions have not received sufficient publicity. Achieve's reviewers repeatedly heard that educators and the public do not appear to take the state's authority to intervene seriously, and thus the authority is not the incentive it could be for failing schools to feel a sense of urgency in turning themselves around. In Maryland, by contrast, the state's well-publicized action to turn four schools over to private management sent a clear signal throughout the state.

Oklahoma may wish to think of expanding or developing more fully options for failing schools. One approach is to replace the management of persistently low-performing schools. Another option, which Colorado will implement this year, allows districts to convert schools rated failing into charter schools. Still another approach, which the new federal law requires, would provide additional options for students in low-performing schools. Under the law, students can transfer to other public schools or receive supplemental services, like tutoring, from private providers.

Schools are not the only institutions responsible for improving student achievement; districts and the state have important roles as well, and they all should be held accountable. In addition to its measures for schools, Maryland has been a leader in district accountability. In 1996, the state passed special legislation establishing unique governance arrangements and targeting programs and funds for the Baltimore City system, which serves about a third of the state's minority student population and Title I participants, yet has the lowest wealth per pupil in the state. The state and the city instituted a new partnership, with a new school board and CEO as superintendent; in return the state substantially increased financial aid to the district. The achievement of Baltimore students seems to be on the rise — an encouraging sign.

✓ **Create real incentives for students to achieve.**

Oklahoma has taken notable strides to make the high school diploma meaningful by strengthening graduation requirements and implementing tests that measure student achievement in designated high school courses. Such efforts surely have contributed to the state's impressive record on the ACT — an increase in average scores at a time when participation increased.

However, these steps may not have gone far enough to create real incentives for students to achieve at high levels. Students who take the required coursework can earn as low as a "D" and still graduate. Even if students take the tests, their scores matter only if college admissions officials or employers look at their transcripts and factor in the results in their decisionmaking. There is no designated level of proficiency that students are expected to reach.

Nearly half the states currently have in place, or will soon, a test that students must pass to graduate from high school. Several of these efforts have attracted controversy, but the Achieve team found real and widespread support for such a move in Oklahoma. Educators, business leaders and public officials recognize that a graduation test creates the proper incentives for students to study hard and succeed in high school. As the Massachusetts experience shows, when test performance counts, students rise to the occasion.

This is not to say the system should be rigid. While elected representatives, higher education leaders and employers must unequivocally support the state's system of assessment and accountability, they should also consider building a "safety net" for a limited number of students who may be able to demonstrate through other means that they have met state standards. For example, such students should have demonstrated good faith efforts to pass required assessments on multiple occasions, have come close to passing and have good grades in their academic coursework in a rigorous curriculum.

✓ **Ensure that the career and technology education system works in conjunction with the K–16 system to prepare students for high-skill careers and continuing education.**

The issue of how best to prepare students for workplace success in a "knowledge economy" is taxing many states. For more than a decade, the U.S. Department of Labor has consistently pointed out that low-skill jobs are on the wane and has urged that students be ready for continuing education even if they choose not to seek further education immediately after high school graduation. Current statistics from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that 75 percent of high school students are choosing to enroll in some form of postsecondary education.

It is clear to Achieve that Oklahoma should continue its push for a common core of high school courses, which terminate in the kind of end-of-instruction tests the State Department of Education already is putting into place and requiring for graduation. Adequate preparation in math is essential for higher education and the workplace, yet it is the area of study most in need of attention. Requiring four years of high school math is a solid approach, providing that substandard courses are not permitted to take the place of rigorous Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II courses. Quality control is paramount. Another, perhaps interim, strategy is to require that students take a second year of math and pass a state test to graduate.

Other states have managed to strengthen academic requirements for all students, including those in career and technical education. In 1997, New York established new graduation requirements, gradually replacing basic competency tests with the state's more demanding Regents Exams in

English, mathematics, science and social studies (U.S. history and government and world history). To help support students in the transition, the traditional passing score of 65 was temporarily lowered to 55. These graduation requirements hold for *all* students, even those pursuing a technical program. New York has further worked out provisions for students to earn a technical endorsement on a Regents diploma or a Regents diploma with advanced designation. To make students eligible for these options, school districts must engage in a program approval process that culminates in a sign-off by the state.

An Oklahoma version of stronger high school standards for all students should build on the significant partnership between the State Department of Education and the State Regents for Higher Education. The two sectors should work together, along with the business community, to define the knowledge and skills students need after high school and design tests that measure those abilities. But Oklahoma does not need to define those expectations on its own. Five states — Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas — currently are working with Achieve and other national organizations in a partnership, known as the American Diploma Project, which is designed to help states analyze whether they have set the bar for graduation requirements in reading, writing and mathematics at the right level; stimulate demand — from higher education and employers — for standards-based high school assessment data in their admissions and hiring process; and create new high school graduation benchmarks in English language arts and mathematics that states can use to judge the quality and rigor of their standards and tests. In the spirit of the American Diploma Project's goals, it seemed to reviewers that one innovation the regents would want to consider is instituting a uniform, common set of placement tests to be used by all institutions of higher learning in the state.

In addition to strengthening the academic preparation of high school students in general and high school CareerTech programs in particular, Oklahoma also needs to ensure that the career and technical programs in particular succeed in their primary mission: placing students in entry-level jobs that have worthwhile career paths.

Judging the ultimate success of the state's system of career and technical education will require the state to track students beyond high school to determine if they found gainful employment in the field for which they were trained or if they successfully completed a program of continuing education or, ideally, both.

✓ **Develop a student-tracking system.**

An expanded assessment system should be combined with a student tracking system that would enable parents and teachers to measure performance over time and determine the "value added" teachers and schools contribute to student achievement. The system also should follow students over time, even if they change schools. Such a system is particularly valuable in a state like Oklahoma where, the Achieve team heard, student mobility is quite high.

Some Oklahomans have objected to such a system on the grounds that it might invade children's privacy and create a "Big Brother"-type database. But the experience in Ohio, Texas and other states with tracking systems shows that such fears may be unfounded. Georgia, in fact, has specifically prohibited the state from using Social Security numbers to track students and instead uses coded identification numbers that cannot be traced.

Moreover, Oklahoma has experience with a student-tracking system in higher education. The regents are able to follow students as they move through colleges and universities to provide information to the high schools from which they graduated on their postsecondary performance. As the state looks into developing a tracking system for K–12, officials should work with the regents to build on their experience and make the systems compatible with, or linked to, one another.

CONCLUSION

In making these recommendations to strengthen Oklahoma's assessments and accountability system, Achieve is under no illusions that implementing them will be easy. Some of them will require funding, always a challenge in Oklahoma and particularly at a time when budgets are tight. Some of them will require more aggressive action by the State Department of Education, a step that goes against the strong tradition of local control over education in the state. And some will require a carefully thought out public awareness and engagement campaign.

Despite these challenges, Achieve believes that the recommendations are feasible. What they require most of all is leadership. As we have seen in state after state, strong leaders can accomplish great goals — and, most importantly, produce great results in higher student achievement.

Oklahoma has benefited from strong leadership in education. Political leaders have taken bold steps, beginning with the landmark reform law of 1990. The State Department of Education has led the way in developing standards and assessments and beginning a system of holding schools accountable for results. The State Regents for Higher Education have taken the initiative to strengthen students' preparation for college. And the business community has shown that it is willing to organize and invest resources on behalf of improving education.

The state's leadership is going through a period of transition in 2002. The governor's term is expiring. The state superintendent is running for re-election. And the chancellor of the board of regents is retiring. For these reasons, it makes sense for the business community — particularly through its institutional arm, OBEC — to take the lead in helping usher through the next stage of education reform in Oklahoma.

In taking on this role, the business community can offer a number of advantages. Not part of any one sector of education, it can bridge K–12 and higher education and bring them together to build on the strengths of the initiatives they created. Business also is seen as a credible and independent voice throughout the state. And the success of the MAPS for Kids initiative in Oklahoma City in 2001 shows that business leaders can help achieve results.

Perhaps the most critical initial task is to persuade Oklahomans that a stronger system of standards-based reform is essential. The leaders in government, education and business clearly know that it is, but many residents of the state may not be ready for major changes. By showing how the future of the state depends on a well-educated populace, business leaders and others can begin to develop the support needed to bring these bold reforms to fruition.

The biggest strength of Oklahoma's education system is the widely shared, genuine commitment to improving opportunities for all young people. By channeling this commitment into a single vision for a stronger assessment and accountability system, the state can make this goal a reality.

APPENDIX A: REVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES

RUBEN CARRIEDO

Ruben Carriedo is a senior research associate at the University of Michigan School of Education. He is part of the Study of Instructional Improvement, a comprehensive longitudinal study of instructional interventions at 125 elementary schools across the country. Carriedo has been a teacher, coach, counselor, and secondary school and central office administrator in New York City and San Diego public schools. He served as the assistant superintendent for the Planning Assessment, Accountability and Development Division in the San Diego City Schools from 1987 to 1999.

He has served on the California Assessment Program Policy and Technical Advisory committees, New Standards Project Technical Committee, the National Advisory Panel for the Center on the Reorganization and Restructuring of Schools, the National Advisory Panel on Chicago School Restructuring, PACE/Rockefeller Project Advisory Committee, Editorial Board of the Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Journal, and Advisory Committee of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. He currently serves on the TIMSS-R Technical Review Panel, Advisory Committee on Education Statistics at the National Center for Education Statistics, Trustee Committee on Research and Development of the College Board, and Title I Assessment Committee at the National Research Council and National Academy of Science.

He has worked as a consultant to the Spencer and MacArthur foundations and Booz-Allen on Chicago school reform. In addition, he has consulted with the Ford Foundation to plan a national symposium on assessment and equity. He also served as a member of the national evaluation panel for the Children Achieving reform initiative in Philadelphia.

Carriedo received his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

MATTHEW GANDAL

Matthew Gandal is executive vice president of Achieve, Inc. He manages the Washington, D.C., office and is responsible for overseeing Achieve's major initiatives. These include the 2001 and 1999 National Education Summits and a series of follow-up activities Achieve has launched to help states address the Summit challenges; the Benchmarking Initiative, which helps states compare their standards, assessments and accountability policies with those of other states and nations; the Mathematics Achievement Partnership (MAP), which is designed to help states improve curriculum and instruction in middle school math and measure student achievement using a common, internationally benchmarked 8th-grade test; and the American Diploma Project.

Before joining Achieve, Gandal was assistant director for educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). He helped AFT launch a variety of programs and publications designed to support standards-based reform efforts in states and school districts. He was the

author and chief architect of *Making Standards Matter*, an annual AFT report evaluating the quality of the academic standards, assessments and accountability policies in the 50 states. He also authored a series of reports that compared student standards and achievement in the United States with those of other industrialized nations.

Gandal, a graduate of the Maryland public school system, earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

S. Paul Reville

S. Paul Reville is a lecturer on education and coordinator of state relations at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He also is the executive director of the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform. The forum conducts national policy seminars on key reform issues and provides advice and assistance to a handful of leading-edge states and urban districts engaged in implementing systemic reform programs. Reville is the chairman of the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission. Appointed by the governor, the commission is charged with overseeing the state's implementation of the historic Education Reform Act of 1993.

Prior to his appointment at Harvard, he was the executive director and co-founder of the Alliance for Education, a privately supported, multiservice education foundation dedicated to improving public elementary and secondary education in Worcester and central Massachusetts. Reville was also the co-founder and executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), an organization that provided key conceptual and political support for the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. He currently serves as MBAE's executive director. From 1991 to 1996, he served a five-year term on the Massachusetts State Board of Education where he served on the executive committee and chaired the Massachusetts Commission on Time and Learning. He has been a teacher and a principal in various schools and alternative programs. Reville is a trustee of Wheelock College and the Public Education Network and serves on various state and civic organizations and commissions. He has received numerous professional and civic awards and is a frequent speaker, writer and editor on educational matters.

He received a bachelor's degree from Colorado College and a master's degree from Stanford University.

Robert Rothman

Robert Rothman was a senior project associate of Achieve from May 2000 through March 2002, where he developed and wrote a series of publications for the Public Leadership Initiative.

Before joining Achieve, Rothman was a study director for the Board on Testing and Assessment at the National Research Council. He directed a study on assessment and teacher quality, which produced the report *Tests and Teaching Quality: Interim Report*. He also directed a study on standards-based assessment and accountability, which produced the report *Testing, Teaching, and Learning: A Guide for States and School Districts*. Previously, Rothman was the director of special projects for the National Center on Education and the Economy and a reporter and editor

for *Education Week*. He is the author of *Measuring Up: Standards, Assessment and School Reform* (Jossey-Bass Publishers Inc., 1995) and numerous book chapters and articles on testing and education reform.

Rothman received his bachelor's degree from Yale University.

JEAN SLATTERY

Jean Slattery has been a consultant for Achieve since 1999 and currently serves as director for the Benchmarking Initiative. She was supervising director of curriculum development and support in Rochester, N.Y., from 1989 to 1997, with responsibility for overseeing the work of all subject-area directors in the K–12 instructional program. Her earlier responsibilities as a district-level administrator included serving as director of the middle school (1987–89) and junior high (1985–87) programs. During this period, she initiated Teachers as Partners, a peer-coaching staff development program funded by the Ford and Matsushita (Panasonic) Foundations.

Slattery also is a peer consultant on standards and assessment for the U.S. Department of Education. She has served as a consultant to the Washington, D.C., school district; San Diego Unified School District; a Washington state consortium of rural schools; and the Alabama and Illinois Departments of Education. Slattery also has worked for the Council for Basic Education on projects involving the Flint Community School District, the Nevada Education Department and the Cleveland Municipal School District.

Slattery received a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Albertus Magnus College, a master's degree in science education from Yale University and a doctorate in science curriculum from the University of Rochester.

JANIS SOMERVILLE

Janis Somerville is the senior associate with the University System of Maryland and the National Association of System Heads (NASH), the association of CEOs of the 53 state systems of public higher education. She directs the NASH/Education Trust K–16 Network, through which those two organizations have come together to support a network of higher education, K–12 and civic leaders who are implementing statewide K–16 improvement efforts. Members of the network are committed to working both within their states and with their counterparts in other states to develop coordinated improvement efforts, kindergarten through college. These efforts have a single goal: improving student achievement at all levels and closing historic achievement gaps between students of different racial and economic backgrounds.

A native Pennsylvanian, Somerville began her work in education as a high school teacher in Trenton, N.J. She also worked for several years in higher education, including appointments as the senior academic officer for undergraduate education at Temple University and at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1989, she founded the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative, a joint venture of area foundations and the Philadelphia School District to bring K–12, college and community resources together in a comprehensive high school restructuring and college access initiative.

In 1994, she moved to Maryland to develop Maryland's statewide Partnership for Teaching and Learning K–16; and in 1997, with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, she came to NASH to develop the NASH/Education Trust K–16 Network.

Somerville received her bachelor's degree from the Pennsylvania State University and her master's degree in business administration from Harvard Business School.

JOHN H. STEVENS

John H. Stevens is the executive director of the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC). TBEC is a statewide coalition of business executives and education leaders that works to improve the performance of the Texas public school system in terms of student achievement. The coalition seeks to influence the direction of state policy and encourages and supports the work of local business-education coalitions working to reform schools at the community level. Stevens has written numerous booklets, policy position papers and articles on educational issues and frequently speaks about the coalition's reform agenda at education and business conferences.

He represents TBEC on several committees, including The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Education, Employment and Training Committee; the Commissioner's Advisory Committee on Accountability; the Advisory Committee for the Educational Productivity Council at the University of Texas; the Texas Society of CPAs Helping Schools Committee; the Education Committee of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce; the Advisory Committee for the Region 13 Cohort Administrator Certification Program; the Executive Advisory Board of the New Century Educational Leadership Program at Tarleton State University; and others.

He currently is chairman of the new Texas Principals Leadership Initiative and vice chairman of the Advisory Board of the Texas Statewide Systemic Initiative for Science and Mathematics Reform. He also is a member of the English language arts writing team for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills clarification project.

He was chief writer of the Basic Workplace Skills Training Manual for the American Society of Training and Development. Previously, Stevens created and managed a national training program, which involved over 200 events a year. His department provided support for education reform projects in school districts across the country. He conducted training programs for education leaders in Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa and other nations.

He created and served as executive producer of the award-winning television series, "Inside Your Schools" hosted by Steve Allen. The series focused on major issues in public education and appeared on more than 130 PBS stations and The Learning Channel. While working in Wisconsin from 1970 to 1975, he served on the State Superintendent's Task Force on Educational Goals, the Advisory Committee to the State Legislature on Compulsory School Attendance and other committees.

Stevens received his bachelor's degree from Bemidji State University and did graduate work in psychology and school counseling at St. Cloud State University.

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS

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